

# Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

Wallace Stevens

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I

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

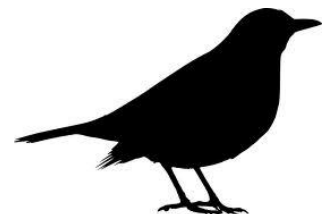
He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.



## Kenneth Lincoln (UC Berkeley)

In his *Letters* Stevens said of the blackbird sequence, "This group of poems is not meant to be a collection of **epigrams** or of ideas, but of sensations." In what senses? Among the Russian formalists, a theorist named Viktor Zhirmunski published a study of rhyme in 1923 . . . specifically focusing on **off-rhyme** and what his Russian colleagues called "making it strange." The device of inexact rhyme calls self-reflexive attention to a literary text and language-as-medium, Zhirmunski said, through a sequencing effect: defamiliarizing a reader entering the text, defacilitating the interpreter with verbal intricacy, and [impeding] the critic's progress digressively. The effect is to slow down time, heighten awareness, and open **radical** interpretive possibilities, where assumption blocks intuition, or arrogance shuts down understanding. . . .

As with off-rhyme, so with slant images—beyond critical **paraphrase**, slightly **gnomic**—they throw the poem into what Yeats called "radical innocence," positions of witness and testament, less interpretation . . . A poem must be, Auden noted, more than anyone can say about it. Just so with the blackbird sequence, a poem of optics and phonics, among other things, shattering reality into irregular **facets** of a mysterious jewel that reflects **spectral** colors, **iridescent** light from a black diamond. At least thirteen ways into this, each angle of **refraction** redefines the blackbird, as each moment shifts the image.